

“Something Beautiful”

Be holy for the Lord your God, am holy.

Leviticus 19:2

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Pastor Jenothy Irvine

It is good to be back. Thank you for the gift of time away for rest, study and renewal. To set the record straight, I did NOT go anywhere but rather, stayed in town, worked on my thesis for my doctorate, did a little remodeling on my house, and spent time reading, journaling, and praying.

Thank you Andy and the staff for their support of my time and for their hard work. We truly are a great team and I appreciate each of them.

As we begin our time of reflection and scripture, share with me please the Prayer of John Christendom as it appears on the screen...

Prayer

Message

Do you ever look at the world today and think to yourself, “What a mess!” I know I do. I mean, it’s a mess. From the men and women on Washington’s capitol hill, all playing a grown up version of the childhood game of “king of the hill,” to people staging a hate crime attack in an attempt to get more money from their employer, you might the world we live in is a mess. People taking the law into their own hands and hurting innocent people. Young children being treated for severe anxiety and depression, some as young as 8 years old being admitted to treatment centers. Teenagers and adults alike thinking that taking their own life is the only answer to their questions of who they are, who they love, and who loves them. Something is messed up. When Christians, followers of Jesus, can’t accept one another, and instead judge one another in order to manage their own sin, making themselves feel better, something is messed up. When we fail to even try to get along or agree to disagree and rather

argue, build walls, and allow fear of the unknown, fear of being uncomfortable, and fear of being wrong, to stand in the way of the kind of community God ordained and Jesus modeled, something is messed up.

Pick up a newspaper, watch the news, pull up a podcast, or read someone's feed on Facebook or Instagram and you will see life is a mess right now. Whether it is on a national, local or personal level, or whether it is politics or religion. What are we to do? How can anything beautiful, good or true come from such a mess?

The words of Leviticus 19 help us step into the answer. Yes, Leviticus 19. It's not the first place I would have looked either. It's not the only place to find our answers. I don't know that I have ever heard a sermon based on this book of Old Testament law, codes, rules and regulations. Perhaps that is why it is so powerful. Perhaps the strength of what it offers is in the fact we don't expect to find much there. Perhaps that is why it can take something so messy and create, discover, build and imagine something beautiful.

READ TEXT

From the perspective of a modern or postmodern reader, Leviticus appears to be the least useful book of the Bible. Honestly, how many of you actually know where the book of Leviticus is located in the bible, or have actually read through the entire book? Much of it is filled with instructions about ancient Israel's sacrifice system that was the heart of worship in the tabernacle. These instructions are known as the holiness codes. If you want to know what parts of a sacrificial animal are to be burned and what parts of its insides are to be washed and what to do with the blood when making a burnt offering, then Leviticus is for you. If you want to live a nomadic life in the desert, then some laws of Leviticus might fit your situation. And if you're interested in following kosher dietary restrictions, Leviticus may prove helpful. But unless those things describe

your circumstances, you're likely to find much of this third book of the Old Testament less-than-uplifted reading.¹

However, here is something that could cause us to rethink all that: In the New Testament, Leviticus is quoted several times, including by Jesus himself. When Jesus was asked about which commandment was the greatest, he answered by citing two: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." That second one, "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a direct quote from Leviticus 19 (our text for today), and Jesus said that "Upon these two commandments hang ALL the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures" (Matt. 22:40).

The apostle Paul also quotes that verse from Leviticus in his letters to the Romans (13:9) and to the Galatians (5:14). What's more, the New Testament book of James, which almost everybody agrees is a helpful and important book, actually seems to be a sermon based on Leviticus 19:12-18.

SO, given all that New Testament attention to Leviticus, perhaps we should take another look at this book, especially chapter 19. People of God, hear these words again - Lev. 19:1-2 and 18.

READ TEXT

That's it folks. The whole great big mess comes down to and can be cleaned up in two verses. All you have to do? Be holy and love your neighbor.

Easier said than done right? Maybe, but maybe not. Maybe, we as humans simply makes things much harder than they need to be. One of

¹ Portions of this sermon and background information was gathered from "The Leviticus Lesson" found on homileticsonline.com

the first questions we ask is “How?” How do we demonstrate a holy life? How do we love our neighbor?

Wait, no that’s not right. No, the first question we need to ask is what every two and three year old knows to ask, “why?” Why live a holy life? Why love my neighbor, especially *that* one?

Answer? “Be holy God says, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” I am going to tell you something that will serve you well if you don’t already know it. Remember when you would question your mom, dad, or maybe your grandparents? More often than not, what would they eventually say to you? “Because I said so, that’s why!” The phrase “I, the Lord your God, am holy” is the the divine “because I said so”.

If you think about it, yes maybe from our parents it was sometimes said in frustration but if you could hear behind their words and into the depth of their voice, they were really saying, “because I love you.”

It’s past bedtime, get off the phone, brush your teeth and go to bed. Why? Because I said so - because I love you. You were given to me by God to take care of, and don’t want you to lose your teeth to cavities or get overly tired, run down and end up sick.

Finish your vegetables and drink your milk. Why? Because I said so - because I love you and want you to get the nutrition your body needs to be healthy and strong.

Use your manners, be kind, wait your turn and help others. Why? Because I said so - because I love you and want you to understand what it means to be a part of something bigger and how to get along in the world around you.

It is easier to simply say, “because I said so” but there is much more to it. So it is with God. “Be holy.” Why? Because I said so - because I love you far more than you can possibly imagine. I want to provide for you, sustain you and bring you into completion. I want to be in relationship with you. I love you.

That is why.

Now we can ask how? How do we live a holy life? How do we love our neighbor, especially that one? The first difficulty is that the word “holy,” at least as used in the Bible, does not lend itself to an easy definition. In the bible, “holy” is a description of God, but because we do not normally use the word in other contexts, we cannot use comparison or personal experience as a means for understanding it. When we call God, shepherd, protector, mother, father, provider, or creator for example, we have a sense of what that means because we have earthly examples, but when we call God “holy” there is no daily life example to help our understanding.

Holy is a specialized theological word, and Leviticus uses it much the way Jesus used the word “perfect” in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, “Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). That’s a theological use of the word “perfect” to describe God, and our understanding of what perfect means from everyday life just doesn’t help us much in understanding truly what Jesus meant when he said it.²

To be perfect does not mean to never make a mistake, never mess up, or never sin. Rather, it means completeness / wholeness. Something can be said to be perfect when it is all there, complete. So when we read “be holy for I, the Lord your God am holy” or when Jesus says, “be perfect, therefore, as God is perfect,” think of the words “be complete,” or striving toward completeness. Dare I say then, loving our neighbor, even that one, makes us more complete? Yes it does.

² The Leviticus Lesson, homileticsonline.com

The trouble with being holy, is that it cannot be rolled up into a single activity or be reduced to a way of dressing or expressed solely by carrying a Bible everywhere. Church attendance by itself doesn't count. Knowing the Lord's Prayer, Apostles Creed, or the 10 Commandments in and of itself doesn't cover it. Rather, the presence of God - the very imprint of God among us is expressed in our daily practices and acts of thoughtfulness, kindness, justice, mercy, compassion, generosity, and wait for it...love. Those are the expressions of God's holiness in the world. Whether that world is right here in Franklin, the bank down the street, the drop off line at school, the doctor's office, in your own house, or across to the nation's capital and around the world. That is the loving your neighbor part.

Behind the archaic sacrificial instructions found in Leviticus, the outdated rituals and complex dietary restrictions that are unnecessary for contemporary Christian living is this rock-solid truth: we are to be a holy people because the God who created, designed and loves us, is holy. We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. EVERYTHING else, Jesus said, hangs on those two: love God, love neighbor. In doing so, we come to recognize, it is not about us - what we want, what we like, what we can or cannot accept, what makes us comfortable, what makes us feel popular or in control. It is not about being right, having more experience or authority.

The times and culture may have changed but the essence and truth of God's message has not. It was and is and forever will be about our lives being an expression of a holy God who so loved the world that he gave everything to us out of a desire to make something beautiful, good and true. That "something" begins in and comes to life by living in community WITH others; alongside and accompanying ALL people on this crazy train called life and faith.

The bottom line dear church, is and always has been this: whatever mess we find ourselves in in this life - in this world, in the church, in our families, with friends, with strangers, and with those who think, act, live, choose, and believe differently, the only way through is to recognize it is about love and relationships. God's love expressed in our connection to people and them to us. It's called community and we need to be about loving and relating to people, all people. Not because we agree with them, or we like them, or they us. Not because we fully understand them, but because being in relationship, being connected to others is what it means to experience the completeness and perfection of God.

As long as people are involved, there will always be a mess. Thank you God, through love and relationship, something beautiful can come out of it. May each of us do our part to make it so. AMEN

Other Resources Consulted

George A. F. Knight, Daily Study Bible Series - Leviticus
New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol. 1